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By George Bengé

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — It is homecoming day at the University of Illinois. Pristine rays of sunshine beam down from a cloudless October sky. The smoky aroma of tailgate barbecue permeates the air.

Undergrads are tossing footballs, alums are swapping memories and boys with faces painted orange and blue are getting stoked for the game.

For generations, University of Illinois students, alumni, officials, families and fans have returned on homecoming to cheer for the team and to celebrate with Chief Illiniwek, mascot of the school's athletic teams since 1926.

I came to this leafy, quintessentially Midwestern campus on homecoming weekend to see the Illiniwek spectacle for myself.

During my time here, I also saw that: After eight decades of institutionalized cultural insensitivity, the timing is right for the university to officially terminate the demeaning fantasy of Chief Illiniwek and the equally demeaning nickname "Fighting Illini."

The university dogma that has perpetuated Chief Illiniwek has no basis in coherent reality.

A climate of fear and intimidation permeates the lives of Native American administrators, faculty members and students who exercise their First Amendment freedom to speak out against Chief Illiniwek.

Sanctions imposed on the university by the National Collegiate Athletic Association because of Chief Illiniwek have created hope that the chief's retirement might come soon.

The Illiniwek culture is so deeply ingrained — from cradle to grave — that loyalists hope to somehow keep the chief alive even after the university's board of trustees delivers the inevitable coup de grace.

The shadow of Illiniwek is reflected in diverse voices all across campus.

Christina Rodriguez, 21, a senior from Chicago, says: "The chief is a symbol of divisiveness against Native Americans. I find it an offensive stereotype and a blatant misrepresentation."

Judith Estrada, 24, a graduate student and Chicana from Los Angeles, gives me a campus tour, pointing out Antonio's Pizza, where the walls are festooned with images of Chief Illiniwek.

"We don't go there anymore," Estrada said. "I don't want to see the chief while I'm eating."

Inside Follett's bookstore and Gameday Sports, garish arrays of "chief" merchandise include Illiniwek blankets, caps, sofa decorations, shirts, pennants, car ornaments, baby outfits, wristbands, videos, briefcases, Christmas stockings, hair bows and teddy bears.

Nyle Bolliger, of Homer, Ill., a director of software programming at the university and a supporter of the chief, said that "because of the NCAA sanctions, at the end of the year I think he'll be retired ... Most people are resigned to the fact that he'll be going."

That would be wonderful news to Wanda S. Pillow, director of Native American House and the American Indian Studies Program at Illinois. Pillow has lobbied top university officials to retire Chief Illiniwek "in image, logo and name."

Once, Pillow discovered that the lug nuts had been removed from the wheels of her car. Now, before she starts her car, Pillow says: "I look. I walk around the car and look for anything out of the ordinary ... There is something tangible (going on) here on campus that we can feel."

Debbie Reese, a Nambe Pueblo, is an assistant professor of Indian studies who also has implored trustees, the NCAA and U.S. Sen. Barak Obama to retire Chief Illiniwek. "My dad does not want me working here," Reese said.

Jay Rosenstein is an associate professor of journalism and a TV documentary producer whose landmark work, "In Whose Honor? American Indian Mascots in Sports," focused national attention on Chief Illiniwek in 1997.

"The climate here has changed in many ways, and 'In Whose Honor' had something to do with that," Rosenstein said. "Before, protests did not even register. Now it is accepted that there is another side to this issue. Now it has teeth."

And what of Chief Illiniwek himself?

Frankly, the chief's halftime act was a colossal letdown.

A barefoot little Caucasian guy, Dan Maloney, of Galesburg Ill., aka, Chief Illiniwek, strutted, pirouetted and pranced in faux Indian buckskins, feathers and face paint while the Marching Illini band played three traditional Illinois songs.

The orange-clad Illiniwek faithful rose, swaying left and right, singing the school songs and chanting "Chieeeeef, Chieeeeef."

After all the hype — some people had even described the chief's performance as "erotic" — I found that what the P.A. announcer described as "the most exciting four minutes in college athletics" was a sad and underwhelming non-event.

The chief struck me as a pathetic, offensive anachronism badly out of step at a time when a cultural renaissance is occurring among real Native Americans outside the Urbana-Champaign city limits.

One hopes — prays — that this was the chief's final homecoming dance.

George Bengel, a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, writes a monthly commentary on diversity issues for Gannett News Service.

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